

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:  
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

**INFORMANT: MARGARITA ZAPATA TURCOTTE [MEXICO]**

**INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL**

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**C = CHRISTOPH**

**M = MARGARITA**

**Tape 08.26**

C: If you could just identify yourself, give your ethnic background.

M: My name is Margarita Zapata Turcotte, and I came to Lowell from Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico twenty-seven years ago. The reason I came here was because I met someone from Lowell in my city teaching in a bilingual high school. So he was teaching some subjects in English and he was also teaching ESL I was working in another educational institution in Leon and the two campuses were kind of close together, so faculty from both campuses socialized and attended the same events and stuff like that. At one of these I met my future husband and then I ended up here.

C: How was it when you first came here? Was it a culture shock for you or had you been here before?

M: My first experience with the United States was California, and California was not really a culture shock to me because of the Hispanic culture and history, weather, everything was much more familiar. But when I came to Massachusetts it was very different, there were many culture shocks and the weather was so bad, I really didn't think I was going to survive. There are still things that I haven't very much adapted to, but I have pretty much made my life here, and a happy life, but I have not lost my identity, I have not lost my cultural costumes. As a Mexican with a big family in Mexico, I'm still very much in contact with them. I go to Mexico two to three times a year to visit family and enjoy a lot of things that are there, places...

C: Do you still call back and forth?

M: I call once a week or every two weeks and the thing is that nobody in my family joined me after I came here and became a US resident and then a US citizen. As a US resident and citizen I could have my parents come and join me and eventually they could ask for the children and so forth, but nobody wanted to join me here, either because they are very happy over there or they don't think they could survive in this environment. The language issues, the cultural issues would be too much for them and for which I don't blame them.

C: You mentioned your ethnic heritage is important to you, if you have children, have you passed on the language and culture?

M: I don't think Mexicans lose their identity easily. A little background on my family... I come from a very strong and patriotic Mexican family [on both sides]. On one side they used to have huge possessions of land in Mexico and a huge history of political activity and social activity too. On the other side of my family we have famous people like Jose Zapata and his nephew Emiliano Zapata, and so on, because there are other people in the family that have never stopped being activists and politically involved and influential. Because I come from families that are so big and so committed to the history of Mexico, it's just too difficult for me to forget who I am and where I come from. Being here has made me even stronger in finding out who I am and how different too I am from this environment. When I had my daughter and my son I was talking in Spanish to them, but because I had a son who was diagnosed at a very early age with something called dyspraxia, it was advised to me not to speak other languages other than English at home because it would have been so difficult for him to learn one language, never mind two, that it was a very sad day for me, a sad time for me knowing they were not going to speak my native language, but I had to except that. But on the other hand I did take them and expose them to the family in Mexico, and I can see that although they are not bilingual they are bicultural, because they are very flexible in terms of the concept of nationalities, and identities and cultures, and different kinds of foods and different kinds of environment. I have also made them read some of the books that have been written about our relatives in Mexico and they are very proud of a few of them. In that regard, I think my mission is completed, because they are very proud of the Mexican side of their origins.

C: What about your cooking?

M: I wasn't able to cook a lot of Mexican foods here, especially in the beginning, because the ingredients were just not available at all. I could find the Puerto Rican store that you can buy some of the ingredients, but not really most of them. I have adapted most of them, like Chiles Rellenos, but I just don't cook them the same way because I don't have the tortillas, so I modify them a little. Rice is an important ingredient, beans are very important to us, so I still cook with beans and rice. And salsa is very important to us, so when I come from Mexico I bring my own cans of salsa and jalepeno peppers. But I also lived for three and a half years with Italian nuns in Mexico City, so I was exposed to Italian food and international food in general, so that part was not a big deal for me. When I came here I was so fascinated about trying a good variety of foods like the Greek food, I love lamb and I learned how to eat everything they cook, and of course Italian and French and all kinds of ethnic foods, I just love that. And then in the early eighties, Asians started to come and I made friends with them, and then of course I loved the food. And they're also party people, which is very much a part of my culture so I love to go to their parties

too. So that part of my identity is very strong, I keep going back. My parents are still alive, my brothers and sisters, we are seven children. I have a lot of siblings and a lot of nieces and nephews. Now that generation is coming here, not to stay with me, but to take advantage of the resources that I have, mainly educational. So I had a nephew that came and stayed with me for one year, and went to high school for one year and he speaks very good English. I have now a niece who is in the graduate program here, and is planning on staying probably for the whole program. She went to an English program and a couple of programs in North Andover and she finished that and now she is here. I am just so happy to have them here and it's also different too because I come from a family that is a community family, it's an extended family culture and it's different. Over here nobody can believe I can just take a nephew in for one year, two years, three years.... It's just not as common and as usual. My siblings' children are my own children. That's the tact that we take with our nieces and nephews, we see them as our own children. So if someone asks if I can take them for one year or whatever there's just no question. If I have the resources because I'm here, they'll come. Of course I will only take one at a time! But it's just something very natural for me and I have my own two children.

C: You're working now as an educator?

M: Yes, I've been working as a Spanish teacher in the high schools. I taught at Lowell High School, Tyngsboro High School, and this year I'm teaching in Dracut High School.

C: It sounds like you had a varied occupational past...

M: Well, back in Mexico I worked as a secretary. But I was studying all the time. When I came here I just continued doing the same thing. I started at this university working as a clerk and then moved into a higher position as an administrator, and I was studying until I finished my BA degree and then I did an MA degree in education at a private school, Cambridge College, very, very nice, I just loved their program a lot. And now I'm trying to get my certification which I am waiting for the results of the last exam, which I have to take to become a certified teacher. I already passed the content exam which is the Spanish part and then I took the reading part which I have already passed and I have taken the written part several times which is a hard part for someone for whom English is not the first language, but I'm getting there and next week I hope to see the results of the last test that I took, so we'll see....

C: Does religion play a big part in your life or is it a non-issue?

M: Religion is very important in Latin American countries in general and especially in Mexico, you know, it has played a great influence in the history of Mexico. In my family we definitely were not very religious. We believe in spirituality and have been educated in the Bible in our family set-up rather than at church. And actually some of my family did have a lot of problems with the Catholic church and they emphasized to us since we were little the abuse of power that the Catholic church has had in Mexico. So it's important for me to have spirituality, but I definitely don't associate with the Catholic church as most Mexicans do. If there is any religion that is closer to me it would probably be Judaism because of the way I was educated in the Bible, more focused on the Old Testament than in the New Testament.

C: Was there any critical reading of the scripture?

M: I guess in my family there has been a tradition to study the Old Testament and I suppose there has been a strong influence of Judaism. The European side of my ethnic background probably comes from the Jews from Spain because of what I found, like pieces of jewelry, tells me we did have some kind of Jewish influence. The culture has been very strong, for example, when we were very little we are taught that even if we went to a Catholic church we didn't kneel, we didn't bow and things like that, you could tell even if they didn't mention it the culture was there. It was also very strong for us to know there was only one god and we could not believe in any other gods including saints and virgins. So eventually when I was older I realized that some of my relatives had a very open disagreement with and hate of some members of the Catholic Church. But the funny thing is that we never said the word "Jew" or talked about it.

C: I have a friend who is studying the Sephardic Jews in a Hispanic context.

M: That sounds very interesting and I know I need to take time to investigate that more, but the little bit I have done definitely shows we have a lot of Jewish cultural elements: in [terms of] food, the restrictions, we were pretty conservative in that. But the funny thing is that we never said, "We are Jewish," or we practice the Jewish religion, nothing. Obviously, you just couldn't say that. What I heard from the elderly was the Catholic church, the Spanish, came to this country and imposed their language, their culture, their architecture, they knocked down the beautiful cities and built their own buildings and their own churches, and they also imposed their religion. Of course if you have a gun against your head you can say you are Catholic or whatever they want you to say because otherwise you cannot survive. So that was also part of our historical teachings that we heard. But I have not developed a love for the Catholic church, definitely because of my family teachings, but I have not been able to embrace the Jewish religion either because I need to find myself in there. I can easily see myself there because we have a lot of the same cultural background. For us Passover was very important, in fact for us, Passover was the only important holiday we celebrated.... Every year we had to repeat Moses' story, and we never celebrated the catholic holy days too much, we were never really forced to go to church and definitely on Sundays we used to work. We were never told not to, just make sure you understand Moses existed and the teachings of the Old Testament.

C: Lets' maybe switch away from religion and talk about social networks, are you active in any Mexican American groups or anything like that? Any form of community activism that you've participated in now or in the past?

M: In Lowell, the history of the Latinos has been history of failure. When I came here I was part of the Foundation of the Latin American Association which didn't last, some of the people picked it up eventually and did something, more on the basis of cultural things, but we didn't stay. The only thing that has really survived for the past twenty five years is the Puerto Rican festival, but the organizers are a very close group of people, mainly of Puerto Rican origin, and although I am friends with one or two of the founders, I have never been invited to be a part of the Puerto Rican festival. I try to participate because it's very nice... the music and events that take place as part of the festivities, but me and others, Colombians, Dominicans, as far as I know, are not welcome to be part of the [committee]. Which I respect, I mean, it's a Puerto Rican

festival. There have been other groups which I have been asked to participate in, but they haven't lasted.

C: Could you mention a few examples and maybe why?

M: There was another group that started with a Mexican guy, well, it was UNITAS, Unite Us. UNITAS was probably the first Latin American or Latino agency that used to serve Latin Americans, and that was probably the only agency that served and lasted for a few years. I only had a few contacts with that agency. I wasn't really very active on my part with them. I knew them, and I participated in events, but I never really was part of the organization. And then I was asked to take over a Hispanic newspaper in Spanish around the year two thousand, two thousand and two. A group of Latinos started it with the idea of expanding from newspaper, to radio, to TV eventually, but then again, it didn't last.... So I was the editor and managing it, everything, because at one point I lost salespeople and I was doing everything, and it was very difficult, it was very, very hard. But I did it for a while; it was a good experience, Dr. Jeff Gerson used to write a very nice article every month and I translated that into Spanish because it was too important for me to have other people have access in either language to this kind of message that he had. It is actually in the archives at the Mogan Center. Right now I'm on the Board of "Lowell Celebrates Jack Kerouac." I'm on the Board and I've been associated with this non-profit agency for a few years now, and I have a vision with one or two more people, to do some more research and maybe write a book about Jack and his connection to Mexico. So that's one of the plans that I have, I don't know if I will ever do it, but it's something that I have talked to other people about and they are interested. I was a fellow of the Parker Foundation for three years, and as a fellow I was able to influence the decision making of the Parker Foundation to award grants to projects, and that affected, in some instances, ethnic activity, either Asian or Hispanic, but there's not too much activity there. The Parker Foundation gives money only for projects in Lowell. Because of that I know most of the non-profits, and most of the programs that are offered to people in the city and it's just outstanding what Lowell and people have...such generous people have done for the immigrants and for the community in general. And that's one of the things that impresses me the most, because people work for a very low salary and give their life...And they help a lot of people, especially minorities and I really appreciate that. What else in terms of service to the community...I was part of the Mogan Center Park project where we used to also vote for things that they do at the Mogan Center. Kind of a complicated association there, but I served for a couple of years there. And of course I'm a member of ALL, Arts League of Lowell, and as an artist, I don't paint, but I do photography and I also write some poetry in English and Spanish and I've read in several places and at several events. That part goes up and down, sometimes I feel like writing, sometimes I just don't and things like that, so some people know me as a poet too.

C: It sounds like you are very involved in a lot of different things. Let's switch now to power and politics. First, are you a registered voter?

M: Yes...to tell you the truth, because my family in Mexico has been so involved in politics at many levels and for so many generations, I have tried to get away from politics, and one of the reasons I moved to Mexico City was to get away, and get lost in the millions of people there. On the other hand, I did grow up with politics and understand how it works for the most part and all

this and all that, but when I came to Lowell it was so amazing how similar politics were twenty five years ago to the city I came from that it helped me to laugh and get involved in a way. We were a group of people that definitely got together, young intellectuals, young students from UMass Lowell, trying to change the political system here, of course was very corrupted and very closed in terms of who is who. So anyways I was part of that group and I participated in the campaign for city councilor Charlie Gargiulo a very strong activist in the city who brought fair share to the city and did a lot of changes on the social level. And of course he created the Coalition for a Better Acre, so we were very active in the beginning of the creation of that, and it was very difficult. It was a big fight against the power of the city in those years, but luckily it was successful and has been successful since then. The Coalition for a Better Acre went through a crisis last year and luckily it succeeded in the way that I wanted it to. It got to the point where some of the organizers including a Hispanic man that had been there for many years, took the role of leadership instead of being organizers, and when you don't know the difference it's just not the right thing. I saw the first organizers in Fair Share, the Coalition working with people, and how to have people discover themselves, and how to guide them into positions of leadership that they would never even dream of, and they accomplished a lot of things with their leadership, but organizers aren't supposed to provide leadership themselves, and to me that was happening, so I was a very strong supporter of the new office that got to have the majority of the vote and stayed. And I have great expectations for the Coalition for a Better Acre, and hopefully they expand. And I hope they are open to all of the immigrant communities, because it seemed that at one point it seemed like it was just a Hispanic community agency, and it was definitely not what we envisioned it to be at the beginning, it was immigrants no matter where they came from.

C: As a follow up question, considering the high percentage of immigrants in Lowell, does it kind of concern you that we have so few of the newer immigrants on the city council?

M: I think it's very natural for the ones who come first to take over and then to close the doors. I've even heard Latinos discriminate against the Asians and feel very offended that they have been more successful in a shorter amount of time than the Latinos. And in my opinion, you just cannot compare. On the other hand it's just sad that we don't see it as a strength instead, we see it as a competition or a weakness to have newer groups coming all the time to Lowell. If you think about it, when I came here I was amazed at finding all these people together, I could learn Italian, Greek or French if I wanted to in a single place. And I appreciate languages and I appreciate learning from other cultures, especially ancient cultures that I grew up admiring, like the Greeks, Italians and the Irish. And then seeing that they didn't like each other and seeing them discriminate against each other, it was really sad, it was really sad. And then you take the positions of power in the city and then you want to keep it to your own ethnic group. I think in the case of the Asians and the Latinos who have run for office and have not been successful, I myself think I understand a lot why we are not successful, because they wonder why we still have an accent. Like in my case, I learned English as an adult, so obviously we will always have an accent, and for people in the already established community, they don't like to be forced to understand accents, they really get threatened or really don't want to deal with accents and also mentalities and different values, and different customs and different ways of doing things. It takes an effort, and I don't blame them for not wanting to make the effort because it is difficult, but on the other hand if we are part of the community, as you can see, most of us don't go anywhere, so we really should try to live in peace, help each other, and if possible respect each

other. We don't even have to like each other in my opinion, but we do have to respect each other because we are part of the same community. The doors are closed to new immigrants or even second generation immigrants to be part of the political system. And it's too bad because we need services, we need our voice in there. All you need, if you don't want to deal directly with leaders or with people in certain communities, is to find representatives from the same communities that will serve as mediators or whatever. But just to ignore, or reject, or to discriminate is really, really not something that usually produces good relationships and success.

C: Do you go to the Folk Festival or the Southeast Asian Water Festival?

M: Yes, I go and participate in the Water festival, I also participate in the Laos community events twice a year, some of their Washington authorities come here and I'm part of the formal events of those. Right now I'm also part of a group called "Save the Bridge" committee, and this group is very active right now in trying to save the University Bridge. The University Bridge has been named many different names before, but because they are going to build a new bridge their plans are to destroy the one that is there and we see it as a landmark and also part of the writings of Jack Kerouac, as well as the first bridge in the whole city. So a group, including myself, we are very strongly advocating to keep the bridge as a walking, bike bridge, so hopefully that activity will be successful because we do believe the bridge should not be destroyed. So I guess you can see if there's a revolution, if there is a war to fight, Margarita Zapata is going to be there! (Laughter)

C: Well, thank-you so much for your time and sharing your story with us.

You're very welcome.